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SUBJECT: CZECH EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS CAMPAIGN MIREN
IN HARD-BOILED DOMESTIC POLITICS

Classified By: POLEC Counselor Charles O. Blaha, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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¶1. (C) Summary. The Czech Republic's two dominant parties, former PM Topolánek's right-of-center Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and Jiri Paroubek's left-of-center Social Democratic Party (CSSD), have turned the European Parliamentary (EP) election into a bare-knuckled mudslinging campaign dominated by domestic political issues, rather than issues pertaining to Czech influence within the EU. The EP election campaign in the Czech Republic has devolved into a dress rehearsal for the upcoming October parliamentary elections. However, since most Czechs are not familiar with the EP's role or influence, voter turnout on June 5-6 is expected to be lower than the EU average (which was 45 percent in 2004). Still, the results should also provide some insights into voter sentiment leading up to the October elections. The Czech cohort is too small to tip the balance in the 785-member EP, but dramatic gains by CSSD could be a harbinger for domestic elections in October. Four parties are likely to cross the threshold for parliamentary representation. The CSSD, which is part of the Party of European Socialists (PES), is expected to gain a couple of seats, shifting Czech EP representation from a strong European People's Party (EPP) faction (with which ODS associates) to a more PES-dominant faction. Currently no Czech MEPs lead any of the key committees within the European Parliament, and at the moment this does not appear likely to change. End Summary.

Expected Low Turnout Favors More Disciplined Parties

¶2. (SBU) According to pollsters and Czech political analysts, Czech voter turnout may be lower than 28 percent, which was the turnout rate during the country's last and only European Parliament election in 2004. The traditionally-conservative and euroskeptic ODS and pro-EU CSSD lead the group of four parties expected to maintain or gain some of the Czech Republic's 22 EP seats. According to surveys conducted by STEM, the Czech Republic's leading polling agency, and CVVM, another reputable Czech polling firm, ODS, CSSD, the unreformed Communist Party (KSCM) and the Christian Democratic Party (KDU-CSL) are expected to win 5 percent or more (the minimum required threshold to gain a seat), with ODS and CSSD each likely to claim between 20-30 percent of the vote.

¶3. (C) The most recent polling shows ODS slightly in the lead. As there are currently only two Czech PES Members of the European Parliament and 14 Czech EPP members, if ODS and CSSD both garner 20-30 percent of the vote, this would represent a substantial gain for PES as well as a substantial loss for the EPP within the Czech Republic. However, given the Czech Republic's relatively-small size, this will mean a shift of only six or seven seats in the 785-member EP and is therefore unlikely to tip the balance in the EP, where the EPP is currently the largest party by 78 seats. Past Czech domestic elections have shown that CSSD has more uncommitted supporters who are not disciplined about voting, making CSSD

vulnerable to low voter turnout. ODS, on the other hand, has a more loyal base of supporters who tend to show up to the polls. The STEM director and other political analysts agree that higher voter turnout will most likely benefit CSSD and lower voter turnout will benefit ODS. However, CSSD brought foreign campaign consultants into their campaign early on, resulting in a campaign that has a focused and well-presented message. ODS's campaign has not been as slick and ODS decided only late in the game to bring in foreign consultants.

14. (SBU) Some well-known personalities and current MEPs top the list of popular candidates: journalist, former political talk show host and independent candidate opposed to Lisbon Treaty ratification Jana Bobosikova, experienced EU politician and ODS heavyweight Jan Zahradil and career diplomat Jana Hybaskova. According to STEM, the Communists, whose support base consists of a loyal older generation that always goes to the polls combined with a significant number of protest voters, are expected to maintain three to four of their six seats in the EP. Czech right-wing extremists from the Worker's Party (DS) and the National Party (NS) are not expected to surpass the 5 percent threshold for parliamentary representation, garnering about 0.9 percent of the vote each. The newly-created Euro-skeptic Czech branch of Libertas, created by current MEP Vladimir Zelezny, also appears unlikely to win a seat.

Domestic Politics Dominate EP Election Campaign

15. (SBU) The independent candidates and smaller parties such
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as Hybaskova, European Democrats have focused their campaign messages on EU topics such as energy security and regional development. The dominant parties, however, are staying parochial. The fall of Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek's government in a vote of no confidence on March 24 triggered a political crisis that the ODS and CSSD, along with President Klaus, temporarily resolved by forming an interim technocratic government under Prime Minister Jan Fischer which is expected to lead the country until early parliamentary elections this October.

16. (C) Both ODS and CSSD view the EP elections as a dress rehearsal for October. The CSSD is looking to maintain the momentum it gained after it crushed ODS in the October 2008 regional and Senate elections, and ODS is trying to recover from its defeat. CSSD leader Jiri Paroubek has compared the EP elections to the first half of a soccer game, stating that "once you're behind in the first half it's difficult to catch up and win during the second half". With this in mind, both ODS, and CSSD's campaign messages have been limited to generalities about Czech influence in the EU and focused more on internal Czech political issues such as health care fees, pensions, who supports or does not support the Lisbon Treaty, and whether or not the Topolánek government did well at the helm of the EU.

Main Parties Pulling No Punches

17. (SBU) Aside from the mostly internal focus of the EP campaign, both ODS and CSSD had pulled no punches going after each other. CSSD has relentlessly criticized Topolánek's leadership, and has campaign billboards featuring a photo of Topolánek and next to a photo of former President Bush, attempting to make Topolánek look like a Bush lackey and link ODS with the economic policies of the Bush administration, which CSSD blames for the Czech Republic's economic slowdown. ODS also favors bashing its arch rival over promoting its own plans, funding a billboard campaign that shows a sharp-looking Topolánek next to an unflattering photo of Paroubek that plays on the emotions of voters with the words "solutions vs. fear".

18. (SBU) Two weeks ago, an egg-throwing campaign coordinated on Facebook by young Czechs started when an estimated 1,000 anti-CSSD activists attended a CSSD political rally in Prague and hurled hundreds of eggs at CSSD leader Paroubek; some of the eggs were reportedly hard boiled. The egg-throwing campaign has captivated the Czech media, drawing attention away from the EP elections and toward the battle for political leverage between CSSD and ODS. Paroubek and CSSD leadership accused the ODS of organizing the egg-throwing campaign, a charge ODS adamantly denies. The perpetrators say they are motivated by Paroubek's arrogant and populist rhetoric, and some political commentators argued that this is a result of CSSD's inability to connect with younger voters.

Tough Tactics A Precursor of Things to Come

19. (C) Comment: If CSSD is able to mobilize its voters as it did during the October 2008 regional and Senate elections and increase its seat count within the European Parliament from two to eight or nine seats, it will seek to capitalize on these increases going into the October 2009 parliamentary elections. A mediocre CSSD showing, even amid a low turnout, would be a disappointment to CSSD and could re-energize ODS, which has been reeling in the wake of last year's election defeats and loss of the March no-confidence vote. If the ODS suffers another dramatic loss, the party may well decide to replace its party leadership ahead of the next elections. However, the possible changes in the Czech cohort are unlikely to cause a shift in the party balance within the larger European Parliament, where the EPP currently holds a majority by 78 seats. Domestically, whatever the final results, the tough campaign tactics and rhetoric of the EP campaign are unfortunate precursors of the parliamentary elections and will intensify as October draws near. Former President Havel warned on June 1 that the increasing bitterness that currently characterizes Czech politics could further estrange Czech society from engaging in politics.
End Comment.
Thompson-Jones